

The Egalitarian Battlefield: On the Origins of the Majority Rule in Archaic Greece

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Abstract

It is today generally understood that the Greeks were the first to formally apply the majority rule during the seventh century B.C. This form of social choice allowed the citizens of a community (*demos*) to experiment with new conceptions of citizenship and radically new forms of political organization. As a result of these experiments the first democratic constitutions were drawn up in Greek city-states (*poleis*) in the sixth century B.C. Citizenship became to mean equality before the law (*isonomia*). The *demos* exercised supreme power (*kratos*) because the citizens voted *on* political issues, not *for* candidates for official positions.

Although voting in political assemblies appears natural in the modern context, the formal application of the majority rule as a social choice method had most radical implications at the time of its inception. First of all, it presupposed individualism and equality of the votes. Social, economic and status differences had to be set aside for the purpose of collective decision-making. Second, it worked only if people somehow expressed their preference and votes could be reliably counted. Third, the majority rule institutionalized divisiveness. It was

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conflict-prone and could lead to the break-up of the decision-making group. Still the Greeks employed it most systematically and comprehensively.

Scholarship of the origins of Greek democracy has traditionally concentrated on the big picture. The different theories of its emergence and evolution are characterized by specific interpretations of ancient sources, ranging from poetry, inscriptions and vase-paintings to the works of historians and philosophers. Modern classical scholarship, represented most notably by Kurt A. Raaflaub, Josiah Ober and Victor D. Hanson, emphasizes that the democratization of politics was the result of interconnected economic, institutional, and technological trends that reach back as far as the eighth-century B.C. and which are thought of as promoting democratic development.

However, regarding the emergence of the majority rule almost nothing is known. The specialist literature on the topic is very limited. The most important questions remain unanswered: was majority voting a true invention or was it gradually formalized? What were the relations with the other institutional and political trends that led to democratization in Greek *poleis* like Athens? Which groups or assemblies were the first to employ a formal majority rule? What induced them to adopt formal majority votes?

One important aspect is that in the late 8th and 7th centuries B.C. an idiosyncratic kind of warfare emerged. Free landowning male citizens who could afford the expensive heavy armour and a large circular shield (*hoplon*) began to fight as *hoplites* in tightly-packed infantry formations called *phalanxes*. The phalanx soon came to dominate the Greek battlefields. Its success was based on its strong internal cohesion, probably caused by the overlapping shields of the hoplites, and its ability to smash the formation of the enemy through the shock of the clash. Sources from the seventh-century B.C. inform us that hoplite warfare was perceived as an egalitarian affair: rich and poor fought side-by-side as equals; there were no privileged people on the battlefield. Aristoteles consequently pointed to a connection between the rise of the hoplites and democratization in ancient Greece.

Did majority decisions emerge from conflict or is conflict triggered after the duty to obey the majority is ignored by the minority? Our starting point is that majority decisions emerged from conflict. This is a classical topic in political sociology. Georg Simmel has argued that “outvoting”, *i.e.* a majoritarian decision where the will of the majority is binding even though the minority does not agree, “operates on the idea that the many are more powerful than the few, and that the function of voting is merely to reach the result of the real contest of forces without engaging in this contest itself” (Wolff 1950: 243). The hypothesis

elaborated in the present paper is that the majority rule could have emerged as a substitute for fighting by *imitating* hoplite warfare in the political arena. We argue that voting may have emerged spontaneously as a *substitute for fighting*. Our aim is threefold: we first need to formulate institutional and technological conditions for fighting and voting to be close substitutes, second to explore whether these conditions were given in ancient Greece in the period 700–500 B.C., and third to explore whether there are historical parallels. The approach chosen is interdisciplinary, bringing together scholarship of the classics, military history and the institutional economics approach to human conflict.

The main proposition is that geography, technology and institutions produced a unique ‘microtechnology of conflict’ in archaic Greece which meant that a trial of military strength could easily be substituted by a vote. This hypothesis rests on a number of arguments. First, under the conditions of hoplite battle the expected loss rate on both the friendly and the enemy side can be expected to be constant and, under certain conditions, equal for both sides in a conflict. Under these circumstances it can easily be shown that battle is mathematically an isomorphism to a series of individual duels, which implies that the simple majority of combatants can be expected to be the decisive factor for the outcome of a battle. Fighting and voting, then, lead to analogous results and are interchangeable. It is thus possible that the first formal applications of the majority rule were made spontaneously on the battlefield, reflecting the expected outcome of the battle. Several observations corroborate this hypothesis. First, passages from the Iliad suggest a close connection between fighting and voting was perceived in seventh century B.C. Greece. Second, sources like Aristotle suggest that the earliest *poleis* to introduce the majority rule were ‘hoplite republics’. Third, similar cases are known from the history of medieval Switzerland where pitched battles between soldiers fighting in similar formations like the archaic hoplites were avoided by a counting of heads.

References

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